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### **Universal program fails to address real needs in education**

Andrea Mrozek -Published September 18, 2010 in the *Vancouver Sun*

Why the incessant chatter that all-day kindergarten will save us money? Minister of Education Margaret MacDiarmid wrote recently about this great investment with "limitless returns for the future of our province and our economy."

Limitless returns. Really?

She may be basing her remarks on a recent report from the Vancouver Board of Trade and the Justice Institute of B.C., which suggests they can save money through early interventions for disadvantaged people, largely by eliminating subsequent criminal behaviour. People of goodwill can disagree on this thesis. However, where there can be no disagreement is here: The B.C. ministry of education is not implementing the sort of program that could possibly claim a return later on.

The new report speaks of efforts to avoid alcohol consumption for pregnant moms and of providing resources for parents through home visitation programs. In short, targeted programs for the disadvantaged.

We are not addressing those problems with the current approach.

Enter the oft-cited Nobel Prizewinning economist James Heckman. Never have you met such a brilliant mind so oft misrepresented. Dr. Heckman says the evidence shows the early years (birth to age 3 or 6) matter. He likewise says a minority of kids are not getting what they need in those early years. His recommendation is that investment should be made to disadvantaged children and their families, and that this targeted investment will bring economic and social returns.

And though you'd never hear of it from government, he also speaks of the benefits of private and religious providers. "There are a number of reasons why it's preferable to bring in other providers instead of having universal services provided by governments," he told the Bernard van Leer Foundation in an interview in 2009. "One reason is that you get more resources if you involve religious groups, social groups and communities."

Universal programs don't provide a public financial return because the majority of children are doing just fine. They were learning where they were, be it with parents, grandparents or in daycare and they'll learn at all-day kindergarten, too. They have involved parents. These caring parents can be found from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside to Kitsilano. Some families lack parenting skills, but clearly they don't make up the majority.

You wouldn't know this from some of the academics involved. Without trying to be cheeky, it's almost as if they want more children to be deemed "at risk."

Child care researchers often have vested interests that don't involve the care of children. They might be concerned about the labour market, gender equity, higher unionized wages or the greater centralization of government services.

For example, the University of B.C.'s Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP), which produces the alarmist vulnerability stats, is government-funded and therefore unlikely to bite the hand that feeds it.

"There is an enormous amount of evidence that says children are going to thrive in quality, nurturing settings," was one such news flash spoken by HELP's Paul Kershaw on a radio show recently. "Quality, nurturing settings" are and have been happening in Canada without government intervention for well over a century. Parents provide them, bolstered by extended family and friends.

There is a more truthful slogan the minister could champion, but then again, it's not a vote winner: "Pay higher taxes today, and also tomorrow."

Our elected officials are spending more of our money in a time of debt and deficit, without helping those who are truly in need. One wonders just who will accrue those "limitless returns."

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